Who Can Keep the Peace? Insurgent Organizational Control of Collective Violence[*]

Forthcoming in *Security Studies*

Alec Worsnop[†]

Abstract

Every armed organization seeks the ability to turn violence "on and off" by getting fighters to fight when ordered and to stop fighting when similarly ordered. This ability is a defining feature of what makes organized violence in fact organized. While state militaries develop clear hierarchies and disciplinary procedures to accomplish this goal, the complexity of civil war makes this task more difficult for insurgent groups. I argue that the leaders of insurgent organizations are able to turn violence on and off when they have deliberately established *resource control* through the direct, and exclusive, distribution of resources to their followers and are *socially embedded*. In contrast to existing approaches, I argue that material and social endowments do not predetermine whether leaders can establish resource control or embeddedness. Further, by laying out the precise organizational mechanisms that determine when organizations can turn violence on and off, the article also challenges the utility of conceptions such as "fragmentation" or "cohesion" for explaining insurgent behavior and conflict outcomes. I test the theory by examining variation in behavior over time in two organizations facing very different structural contexts—Jaysh al-Mahdi in Iraq and the Viet Minh in Vietnam—and find strong support for my argument while casting doubt on existing explanations.

1   Introduction

A central moment during the US Surge in Iraq came with the August 2007 stand down of Muqtada al-Sadr's Shiite militia, Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM). As a result, sectarian violence declined drastically as Baghdad stabilized.[1] However, few analysts in academia, the government, or the private sphere expected the ceasefire to hold. They pointed to the supposed fragmentation of JAM, arguing that Sadr did not have sufficient control of the organization to ensure that his movement would put down its arms.[2] As a professor in Baghdad told the International Crisis Group: "Everybody was surprised by the degree to which militants obeyed Muqtada al-Sadr. At first, I expected about half of the Mahdi Army members to ignore him." Instead, compliance was widespread and the ceasefire stuck despite intrusive operations by Coalition and Iraqi forces.[3]

This puzzle—how a seemingly disjointed organization adhered to a ceasefire—demonstrates the need to better understand what determines the level of control insurgent leaders have over their fighters. Existing explanations for insurgent behavior, mainly focused on the role of social and material resources, have produced divergent findings. This indeterminacy is evidenced by the variation in control exercised by organizations that start with similar endowments. Further, this research often simplifies behavior according to binary distinctions such as whether insurgents are "cohesive" or "fragmented" rather than uncovering the mechanisms that explain meaningful categories of behavior such as the (in)ability to keep ceasefires or to control who is targeted by violence.

---

1. Anthony Cordesman and Emma R. Davies, *Iraq's Insurgency and the Road to Civil Conflict* (Prager Security International, 2008); Ann Scott Tyson, "Petraeus Says Cleric Helped Curb Violence," *The Washington Post*, December 7, 2007, washingtonpost.com.

2. For example, see Sabrina Tavernise, "Cleric Said to Lose Reins of Parts of Iraqi Militia," *The New York Times*, September 28, 2006, nytimes.com; Hamza Hendawi and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, "Shiite Militia May Be Disintegrating," *Associated Press*, March 21, 2007, washingtonpost.com; Anthony Cordesman, *Iraq's Sectarian and Ethnic Violence and Its Evolving Insurgency*, Working Paper (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2007); Paul Staniland, "Explaining Cohesion, Fragmentation, and Control in Insurgent Groups" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2010), 40.

3. International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists and the Surge*, Middle East Report 72 (February 2008), 17.

This paper focuses on one such behavior: whether insurgent organizations engaged in civil wars can turn violence "on" by ensuring their soldiers fight when ordered and whether they can turn violence "off" by assuring compliance with ceasefires. This level of control is fundamental since it is a defining feature of what makes organized violence in fact organized. I argue that leaders are able to turn violence on and off when they establish *resource control* and *social embeddedness*. Resource control, or the direct and exclusive distribution of the key resources members need to fight and live, positions organizations to provide inducements that give their fighters reasons to follow the leadership's orders. However, because not all fighters are motivated by resources alone and it is difficult to monitor their behavior in real time, it is hard to credibly enforce threats to withhold these inducements. As such, only when organizations use resource control to leverage social embeddedness is enforcement possible because organizations can rely on deployed units to self-police by employing group norms.

By developing the mechanisms through which insurgents can control when violence is turned on and off, this paper makes three contributions. First, though the role of social and material endowments has been consistently highlighted, my argument explains how some organizations succeed with access to resources or pre-existing social structures, while others fail despite access to plentiful resources or strong social networks. In particular, to benefit from material and social endowments, organizations must explicitly configure the way in which resources are distributed so as to leverage the normative power of social foundations. Thus, when leaders directly and exclusively provide material resources, the source of these resources—whether from taxation, natural lootable resources such as diamonds or gems, external support, or caches of food and weapons—is not critical.

Second, and relatedly, it is not insurgents' structural conditions that explain behavior, but how well organizations leverage those conditions. Insurgent groups are adaptive and diverse military actors, meaning that variation in their behavior is driven by their organizational composition and ability to

change. Organizations that can turn violence on and off rarely depend on their initial endowments but instead seek out new resources or build social ties organically. By not treating an organization's social structure or resource flows as exogenous, but as deliberate examples of organization-building, I uncover critical variation in insurgent development and behavior.

Finally, the theory underscores that treating insurgents as simply "fragmented" or "cohesive" overlooks important variation in capabilities. Many conflict processes are driven by the types of operations that insurgents can, or for that matter, cannot undertake. While the organizational mechanisms in this paper explain whether organizations can turn violence on and off, different organizational mechanisms are necessary to understand if insurgents can carry out more complex behaviors such as controlling who is targeted by violence or employing complex guerrilla tactics.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I demonstrate the need to further disaggregate rebel behavior and explain my focus on the capacity to turn violence on and off. Next, I present a theory connecting the interaction social and material resources to the level of control insurgent leaders can exercise. To evaluate this theory, I return to the puzzle with which I began: how did JAM achieve ceasefire compliance despite seeming fractionalized and fragmented? I treat JAM from 2003 to 2008 as two separate cases and trace how varying organizational attributes affected the ability of JAM to regulate when violence was employed. Next, to demonstrate the reach of the theory, I briefly evaluate it with respect to organizations in southern Vietnam during the First Indochina War (1945-1954). Despite the drastically different conflict conditions in Iraq and Vietnam, I show that the theory explains insurgent control of when violence is employed while competing explanations fall short. Finally, I discuss how the theory and cases fit within the broader civil war literature and conclude with theoretical and policy takeaways.

2 Existing Research and Turning Violence On and Off

A growing literature has opened the "black box" of insurgencies, recognizing that parties to intra-state conflicts are rarely unitary actors.[4] In particular, research on fragmentation studies how rebels behave during civil wars.[5] While this perspective has significantly expanded our understanding of conflict dynamics, research into the causes and implications of broad outcomes such as fragmentation obscures significant variation in rebel behavior and organization. Thus, this section makes two points. First, I demonstrate the importance of disaggregating rebel behavior and explain my focus on turning violence on and off. Second, I show that research into the causes of fragmentation, mainly focused on the role of material or social endowments, does not provide mechanisms that can untangle fine-grained outcomes such as turning violence on and off.

2.1 Disaggregating Fragmentation

Insurgent organizations, like all organizations, face the challenge of controlling the behavior of their members.[6] There is a general consensus in the literature on fragmentation about which organizations will have such control: "fragmented" or "weak," organizations will not be cohesive fighting forces as their followers will not do as they are ordered.[7] Following such logic, Cunningham argues that the number of factions, or "veto players within an organization and across a movement will increase war

---

4. For a summary of this research agenda, see the overview of a special issue of the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* focused on fragmentation: Wendy Pearlman and Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, "Nonstate Actors, Fragmentation, and Conflict Processes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 1 (2012): 3–15.

5. Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, Kristin M. Bakke, and Lee J. M. Seymour, "Shirts Today, Skins Tomorrow: Dual Contests and the Effects of Fragmentation in Self-Determination Disputes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 1 (2012): 67–93; Lee JM Seymour, Kristin M. Bakke, and Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, "E Pluribus Unum, Ex Uno Plures Competition, Violence, and Fragmentation in Ethnopolitical Movements," *Journal of Peace Research* 53, no. 1 (2016): 3–18.

6. Scott Gates, "Recruitment and Allegiance: The Microfoundations of Civil War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 1 (2002): 111–130.

7. Wendy Pearlman, *Violence, Nonviolence, and the Palestinian National Movement* (Cambridge University Press, 2011); Paul Staniland, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Insurgent Fratricide, Ethnic Defection, and the Rise of Pro-State Paramilitaries," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 1 (2012): 16–40; Fotini Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* (Cambridge University Press, 2012); Mitchell Brown, Victor Asal, and Angela Dalton, "Why Split? Organizational Splits among Ethnopolitical Organizations in the Middle East," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 1 (2012): 94–117.

duration as agreements cannot be made." Similarly fragmented groups are found to breed "spoilers" that disrupt negotiating processes by escalating violence.[8] In terms of enforcement of agreements made, Johnston argues that centralized "insurgencies are both more formidable on the battlefield and more reliable at the negotiating table."[9]

Despite this apparent link between fragmentation and rebel behavior, there is not a set way to conceptualize fragmentation. As Bakke et al. observe, while a growing literature studies fragmentation, the "ways of assessing fragmentation and its corresponding implications vary widely."[10] For example, though some study fragmentation within broader movements while others look within specific organizations, mechanisms are often treated as interchangeable.

More fundamentally, categorizing insurgents as "fragmented" or "cohesive" obscures a wide-range of behavior. While the level of violence employed by organizations can be strategic,[11] differences in the level of violence employed are also driven by variation in how much control leaders have over how their fighters use force. Some have complete control, while others can only ensure compliance with highly observable activities such as keeping ceasefires or not defecting *en masse*. These differences in control are crucial to understanding how insurgents can calibrate the use of force to achieve political and military objectives.

Thus, instead of focusing on broad categories of behavior, this paper focuses on a *particular* rebel

---

8. David E. Cunningham, "Veto Players and Civil War Duration," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 4 (2006): 875–892; Stephen J. Stedman, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes," *International Security* 22, no. 2 (1997): 5–53; Andrew F. Kydd and Barbara Walter, "Sabotaging the Peace: The Politics of Extremist Violence," *International Organization* 56, no. 2 (2002): 263–296; Wendy Pearlman, "Spoiling Inside and Out: Internal Political Contestation and the Middle East Peace Process," *International Security* 33, no. 3 (2009): 79–109.

9. Patrick Johnston, "The Geography of Insurgent Organization and its Consequences for Civil Wars: Evidence from Liberia and Sierra Leone," *Security Studies* 17, no. 1 (2008): 107–137; See also, Theodore McLauchlin and Wendy Pearlman, "Out-Group Conflict, In-Group Unity? Exploring the Effect of Repression on Intramovement Cooperation," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 1 (2012): 41–66.

10. Kristin M. Bakke, Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, and Lee J. M. Seymour, "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion, and Infighting in Civil Wars," *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 2 (2012): 266.

11. Benjamin Valentino, "Final Solutions: The Causes of Mass Killing and Genocide," *Security Studies* 9, no. 3 (Spring 2000): 1–59; Lisa Hultman, "Battle Losses and Rebel Violence: Raising the Costs for Fighting," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 19, no. 2 (2007): 205–222; Alexander B. Downes, *Targeting Civilians in War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008).

capability: the ability of organizations engaged in civil war to turn violence on and off. In other words, for insurgents already fighting in a civil war, what explains whether they can convince their soldiers to not desert or shy away from combat on the one hand, and abide by ceasefire orders on the other hand? While often taken for granted in conventional militaries,[12] this basic level of control explains when members of an organization will fight for a cause or if organizations can keep ceasefires that may allow them to rebuild or to participate in political transitions.

Without such control, organizations may be excluded from peace talks because they are not viable partners—research has demonstrated that states will only negotiate with "credible" partners.[13] Similarly, these groups risk losing civilian support if soldiers do not take up arms when ordered, or if they attack civilians when ordered to stand down.[14] And finally, groups risk severe losses in spirals of violence if they cannot convince fighters to stand down when outmatched. Not only will such uncontrolled violence give counterinsurgents justification to use harsh tactics, but, by continuing to openly use force, insurgent fighters can be easily identified and thus discriminately targeted.[15] While this article focuses on the ability to turn violence on and off, as the theory makes clear, the approach has implications for other types of behavior as well.

---

12. An exception is recent work by McLauchlin studying one aspect of turning violence on and off: why some individuals are more or less likely to desert. This paper aligns with that work by identifying mechanisms that can alter individual and group preferences about desertion. Theodore McLauchlin, "Desertion, Terrain, and Control of the Home Front in Civil Wars," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 58, no. 8 (2014): 1419–1444; Theodore McLauchlin, "Desertion and Collective Action in Civil Wars," *International Studies Quarterly* 59, no. 4 (2015): 669–679.

13. Barbara F. Walter, "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement," *International Organization* 51, no. 3 (1997): 335–364; Isak Svensson, "Bargaining, Bias and Peace Brokers: How Rebels Commit to Peace," *Journal of Peace Research* 44, no. 2 (2007): 177–194; Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, *Inside the Politics of Self-Determination* (Oxford University Press, 2014); Katherine Sawyer, Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, and William Reed, "The Role of External Support in Civil War Termination," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, September 4, 2015, 1–29.

14. Reed M. Wood, "Opportunities to Kill or Incentives for Restraint? Rebel Capabilities, the Origins of Support, and Civilian Victimization in Civil War," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 31, no. 5 (2014): 461–480.

15. Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 145-53.

2.2 Do the Causes of Fragmentation Explain Fine-Grained Outcomes?

Given the variation in rebel behavior overlooked when studying the effects of fragmentation, it is not surprising that research into why organizations fragment, or remain united, has produced indeterminate findings. This literature has mainly focused on the role of material endowments, such as pay, food, or supplies, and social endowments, such as pre-existing political and social networks. Below I discuss the limits of research focusing on these factors.

2.2.1 Social Endowments and Embeddedness

Research finds that pre-existing social, political, and religious structures support violent collective action by enabling members to employ status rewards based on norms of solidarity and fairness, ensure monitoring and sanctioning of undesired behavior, share information, and build trust.[16] Such social networks are composed of individuals that interact often, hold diverse relationships, spanning social and economic matters, and share common base beliefs and a rough equality of conditions.[17] Given the importance of such social structures in supporting collective action, recent work by Weinstein argues that organizations embedded in strong communities can better manage behavior because members have "shared beliefs about the purpose and conduct of the war."[18] Staniland expands on this work by focusing on particular pre-war social and political structures. He argues that "integrated" organizations are cohesive as they are embedded in pre-existing political and social "networks that combine strong horizontal links that pull together organizers across localities" with "vertical ties that embed them in local communities."[19]

---

16. James Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); C. Tilly, D. McAdam, and S. Tarrow, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2001).

17. Michael Taylor, *Rationality and Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1988); Roger Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons from Eastern Europe* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

18. Jeremy Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 139.

19. Paul Staniland, "Organizing Insurgency: Networks, Resources, and Rebellion in South Asia," *International Security* 37, no. 1 (2012): 150; Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2014).

Despite the power of embeddedness, it is insufficient to explain organizational behavior. The effect of pre-existing ties does not change during the conflict. Thus, they cannot account for changes within organizations over time—such as JAM's inability to turn violence on and off in 2004 contrasted with its ability to do so in 2007—or for drastically different organizational configurations resulting from similar conditions. For example, despite forming around similar social and religious networks, organizations such as Islamic Jihad and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, Hezbollah and Amal in Lebanon, the Viet Minh and Quoc Dan Dang Front (QDD) Front or the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao in Vietnam, the Taliban and Hizb-i-Islami in Afghanistan, or the 1920 Revolution Brigade and Islamic Army in Iraq, developed different features that created clear contrasts in their ability to control violence.

Social foundations are indeterminate because, while scholars have demonstrated the power of social ties generally, organizations face the challenge of leveraging these ties for their own use. They must ensure that mechanisms regulating violent collective action are directed toward supporting the organization once the fog of war rises. Though the challenge of leveraging social ties is particularly difficult during conflict, it is not limited to military organizations. Evaluating research in Economics and Organization Theory on embeddedness, Dacin et al. observe that organizations do not necessarily benefit from their social underpinnings: "while the density of embedded ties can be managed to a point, not all firms have the same capabilities to do so. Some firms can manage ties better than others and, therefore, it's not simply the existence of ties that makes a difference, but the ability to manage and leverage ties that creates value for firms."[20]

What is more, research into social movements and militaries underscores that strong social ties can be deleterious when not leveraged by the organization—Stewart dubs this the "dark side of so-

---

20. M. Tina Dacin, Marc J. Ventresca, and Brent D. Beal, "The Embeddedness of Organizations: Dialogue & Directions," *Journal of Management* 25, no. 3 (1999): 338.

cial cohesion."[21] Instead of promoting shared commitment to the organization, informal groups can compete with or substitute for the institutions put in place by the leadership. For example, norms of fatalism within *campesino* communities interfered with recruiting and motivating insurgents in El Salvador before the introduction of liberation ideologies by insurgent organizations.[22] Similarly, close relationships promoting drug use and rejection of authority among US troops in Vietnam have been linked to the poor performance of many deployed units there after 1968.[23] Such disagreements may even lead soldiers to defect as is illustrated by higher rates of desertion among Confederate units recruited on a local basis in the American Civil War and by the role of "good comrades" in encouraging desertions from the Wehrmacht as World War II (WWII) came to an end.[24]

2.2.2 Material Endowments

Material resources—including external support, natural resources such as diamonds or drugs, territory, weapons, proceeds from taxation, or food—have also been shown to play a part in sparking and sustaining rebellion. Yet, as with social foundations, existing studies have produced divergent findings about the role that such resources play.[25] Some have found that access to resources creates a "resource curse" in which material goods are used to buy short-term support from members rather than instilling a broader commitment to the cause. The result is "thuggish" behavior whereby followers defect, target civilians, or engage in criminal activity. Similarly, these organizations may turn into "profit-seeking" actors and focus on capturing additional material wealth rather than pursuing the original

21. Nora K. Stewart, *Mates and Muchachos: Unit Cohesion in the Falklands/Malvinas War* (Washington D.C.: Brassey's, 1991), 18; See also, Robert MacCoun, Elizabeth Kier, and Aaron Belkin, "Does Social Cohesion Determine Motivation in Combat? An Old Question with an Old Answer," *Armed Forces & Society* 32, no. 4 (2006): 646–654.

22. Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

23. Charles C. Moskos, "The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam," *Journal of Social Issues* 31, no. 4 (1975): 25–37.

24. Elizabeth Kier, "Homosexuals in the U.S. Military: Open Integration and Combat Effectiveness," *International Security* 23, no. 2 (1998): 16.

25. Michael Ross, "How Do Natural Resources Influence Civil War? Evidence from Thirteen Cases," *International Organization* 58, no. 1 (2004): 35–67.

goals of a rebellion.[26] Alternatively, others have found that resources—including those provided by external actors—play a central role in developing robust and effective insurgents. Not only do these resources provide insurgents with the weapons and logistics to fight, they allow leaders to compensate their members for their service.[27]

These divergent findings illustrate that while an organization's access to social and material endowments does influence civil war dynamics, the direction of the effect and the mechanisms driving it are not well understood. As I argue below, it is what organizations *do* with what they have that determines their capacity to get their soldiers to use force in the way that the leadership prefers. In particular, when they carefully structure how resources are provided, these resources can be used to leverage the normative infrastructure of embedded social ties.

3   An Organizational Theory of Turning Violence "On and Off"

As the above discussion uncovers, leaders of insurgent organizations face an important challenge: they must ensure that their deployed units have the endowments they need to fight well—that they are bonded together and have access to weapons, food, and protection—while also ensuring that fighters do not take advantage of these goods to pursue their particular interests at the expense of the organization. As much of the activity in civil wars is decentralized and carried out by dispersed units, overcoming this challenge is paramount. Thus, how do leaders prevent soldiers from participating in illicit economies beyond the leadership's reach? Similarly, when soldiers are united by tight social ties, how do leaders leverage those ties to support the organization and prevent soldiers from defecting to

---

26. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*; Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers* 56, no. 4 (2004): 563–595.

27. Daniel Byman et al., *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements* (RAND Corporation, 2001); Staniland, "Organizing Insurgency"; A. H Sinno, *Organizations at War in Afghanistan and Beyond* (Cornell University Press, 2008); Patrick M. Regan, *Civil Wars and Foreign Powers: Outside Intervention in Intrastate Conflict* (University of Michigan Press, 2002).

protect their homes or disobeying orders that might clash with community norms?

This challenge is not unique to insurgents. As Thelen and Mahoney identify, nearly all formal institutions have access to some resources and, as a result, must respond to the concomitant "distributional consequences" of how they use those resources.[28] Thus, it is not the social and material endowments that organizations have access to that determine their behavior, but *how* they employ those endowments. Specifically, I argue that resource control and embeddedness interact to allow organizations to turn violence on and off.

Resource control, or the direct and exclusive provision of key staples that followers need to fight and live, positions organizations to provide *inducements* to their followers. However, enforcing threats to withhold these resources is difficult because fighters have diverse preferences—not all fighters are motivated by resources alone—and it is challenging to track down and discipline non-compliance due to the information asymmetries between leaders and fighters. But, in combination with resource control, embeddedness makes *enforcement* less challenging because organizations can rely on deployed units to self-police since threats to withhold resources can be made to the group, rather than the individual. Rather than having to track down and discipline each act of non-compliance, the socially embedded group is motivated to identify misbehavior and can employ group norms to tamp down on individual preferences in tension with orders from the leadership.

3.1   Resource Control

With resource control, organizations directly, and exclusively, provide their followers with the key resources they need to fight and survive in the chaotic context of civil war. These resources can include food, weapons, and oftentimes compensation, whether it be pay, access to employment opportuni-

---

28. James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen, "A Theory of Gradual Institutional Change," in *Explaining Institutional Change: Ambiguity, Agency, and Power*, ed. Kathleen Thelen and James Mahoney (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 8.

ties, property, or welfare services. Critically, resource control encompasses both what is provided—organizations must consistently provide goods that are key to their followers—and how it is distributed—organizations must control how their members access those resources.

Direct provision means controlling the way that critical goods are supplied. Direct distribution often relies on logistics networks that transport goods to the field, centralized offices that soldiers can go to, or regulated depots in the combat zone. With such institutions in place, soldiers start becoming reliant on the organization for the resources they need to keep fighting. While some goods—such as money or arms—can be provided to an organization by external actors, many core necessities such as jobs or access to healthcare can often only be supplied domestically.

On the other hand, with, indirect distribution, organizations are not central in providing goods to their soldiers. Oftentimes this occurs when organizations with access to "lootable" natural resources or significant local cash flows do not institutionalize the way these resources are accessed by their followers. For example, Weinstein, Fearon, and Ross note that reliance on lootable resources can provide incentives for deployed units to accumulate wealth rather than stick to the dictates of group leadership.[29] In these cases, fighters can make money from selling gems or drugs or using their weapons to extort civilians by stealing or forcing them to sell lootable items at a massive discount. Johnston describes this situation in his analysis of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia, which launched missions such as "Operation Pay Yourself," in which subordinates were given "formal permission to engage in…looting and plunder." As a result, its deployed units shared little "common ideology" with leaders as they had "opportunities…to accumulate resources independently with which they could further distance themselves from dependency" on the leadership.[30] Christia identifies an analogous dynamic

---

29. James D. Fearon, "Why Do Some Civil Wars Last So Much Longer than Others?," *Journal of Peace Research* 41, no. 3 (2004): 275–301; Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*; Ross, "How Do Natural Resources Influence Civil War?"

30. Johnston, "The Geography of Insurgent Organization and its Consequences for Civil Wars," 122.

whereby local economic incentives can cause factions to defect and "undermine group unity."[31]

Importantly, access to lootable resources or the spoils of war does not preclude direct resource provision or doom organizations to failure. Groups such as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and the FARC in Colombia put in place systems to centralize collection of proceeds from lootable resources, smuggling networks, and narcotics, thus using these goods to establish direct resource provision.[32] Similarly, the Viet Cong in Vietnam explicitly shaped how captured resources were handled. As Holliday and Gurfield reported, "There is a Viet Cong directive on the subject of war booty. War Booty Councils are established at three levels. All types of war booty, military as well as civilian, are gathered, inventoried, and reported to higher headquarters," before being re-distributed to fighters.[33]

Even when the leaders of insurgent groups directly distribute resources, however, the utility they gain is limited when it is not exclusive and other members of the organization, the broader rebellion movement, or the state can also supply access to the same resources, whether food, weapons, or welfare.[34] Exclusivity requires that organizations provide resources others cannot, or do a better job of distributing those resources. As Berman finds, "members who would have considered leaving the club when outside options were good will instead remain demonstrably loyal if the club suddenly becomes their sole provider of necessary services."[35] Organizations that provide such club goods set themselves apart from competing organizations. For example, while both Islamic Jihad and Hamas supply some solidary and religious goods, Hamas provides a wide range of other material resources that make them

31. Fotini Christia, "Following the Money: Muslim versus Muslim in Bosnia's Civil War," *Comparative Politics* 40, no. 4 (2008): 461–480.

32. Benjamin Bahney et al., *An Economic Analysis of the Financial Records of al-Qa'ida in Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010); Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín and Antonio Giustozzi, "Networks and Armies: Structuring Rebellion in Colombia and Afghanistan," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 9 (2010): 836.

33. L. P. Holliday and R. M. Gurfield, *Viet Cong Logistics*, Memorandum RM-5423-1-ISA/ ARPA (RAND Corporation, 1968), 62.

34. Gates, "Recruitment and Allegiance: The Microfoundations of Civil War," 121.

35. Eli Berman, *Radical, Religious, and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism* (MIT Press, 2009), 113.

central to their followers.[36]

When organizations establish resource control by directly and exclusively providing resources, individual followers become dependent on the organization for the things they need to fight and live. As a result, these inducements—and threats to withhold them—provide footsoldiers with reasons to follow the dictates of the organization in order to maintain access to these key staples. On the other hand, when organizations do not directly and exclusively provide resources, or the soldiers can get them elsewhere, "the soldier will seek them outside the unit, and often in groups with goals not congruent with those of the army."[37]

As the distinction between Hamas and Islamic Jihad demonstrates, while organizations might be initially endowed with some resources, they still must shape the way in which those goods are distributed to create resource control. Moreover, it is common for organizations to deliberately generate access to the resources that make control possible. Rather than simply taking advantage of their initial endowments, Hamas' leadership carefully created a social services sector. In the same vein, as the cases lay out, both JAM and the Viet Minh established resource control by identifying the needs of their followers and working to fulfill them.

3.1.1   Inducements from Resource Control Are Not Enough

While resource control positions organizations to provide inducements, leaders are still faced with the significant challenge of making threats to withhold these inducements credible by monitoring fighters' behavior.[38] While difficult in many contexts, monitoring behavior is particularly challenging in civil

---

36. Matthew Levitt, *Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

37. William Henderson, *Cohesion, the Human Element in Combat: Leadership and Societal Influence in the Armies of the Soviet Union, the United States, North Vietnam, and Israel* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 1985), 18.

38. McLauchlin, "Desertion, Terrain, and Control of the Home Front in Civil Wars," 1422; As principal-agent accounts identify, the level of control that the central leadership (principals) has over their followers (agents) is dictated both by their ability to provide compensation and perks *and* their ability to monitor the behavior of those agents. For example, see: Gary J. Miller, "The Political Evolution of Principal-Agent Models," *Annual Review of Political Science* 8, no. 1 (2005): 203–225.

war. As Gates observes, "In the fog of war centralized monitoring is difficult. Problems of asymmetric information dominate. Latent opportunism abounds. Asymmetric information makes it difficult to reward efforts and punish defection."[39] Thus, while insurgent leaders can observe if units violate a ceasefire, or that fighters fled the battlefield, they will face significant challenges in identifying the particular *individuals* who were non-compliant. As a result, few will fear that they will actually be punished since it is unlikely they will be caught.

This challenge is made even more daunting because fighters' preferences are often varied, making it difficult to use inducements alone to change the behavior of individuals or groups. Long and short-term preferences can include seeking prestige or personal pleasure through the use of violence, collecting war spoils, protecting their families' safety at the expense of the broader fighting force, or simply fleeing combat.[40] Moreover, these preferences can change over the course of a conflict, emphasizing that the reasons individuals join an organization often do not explain their behavior once they are members.[41] As a result, no fighting force can be sure that each individual is committed to the organization's strategy because there will always be "considerable variation in the extent to which fighters are motivated by collective rather than private goals."[42]

Importantly, even organizations with very committed fighters faced these same challenges. Even when fighters are totally aligned with the organization about overall objectives, there can still be sig-

---

39. Scott Gates, "Why Do Children Fight? Motivations and the Mode of Recruitment," in *Child Soldiers: From Recruitment to Reintegration*, ed. Alpaslan Özerdem and Sukanya Podder (Springer, 2016), 38.

40. For example, see, Krijn Peters and Paul Richards, "'Why We Fight': Voices of Youth Combatants in Sierra Leone," *Africa* 68, no. 02 (1998): 183–210; A. M. Arjona and Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Rebelling Against Rebellion: Comparing Insurgent and Counter-Insurgent Recruitment" (Centre for Research on Inequality, Human Security and Ethnicity, 2009); M. Humphreys and J. M Weinstein, "Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War," *American Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 2 (2008): 436–455.

41. Paul D Kenny, "Structural Integrity and Cohesion in Insurgent Organizations: Evidence from Protracted Conflicts in Ireland and Burma," *International Studies Review* 12, no. 4 (2010): 533–555; Elisabeth J. Wood, "Armed Groups and Sexual Violence: When Is Wartime Rape Rare?," *Politics & Society* 37, no. 1 (2009): 131–161; McLauchlin, "Desertion, Terrain, and Control of the Home Front in Civil Wars."

42. Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy Weinstein, "Handling and Manhandling Civilians in Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 100, no. 3 (2006): 432-33.

nificant divergence in terms of tactical preferences.[43] For example, many footsoldiers become increasingly violent as a result of war-time socialization and thus develop different views from their leaders about the way in which violence should be employed.[44]

As I elaborate below, in 2004, JAM fighters were aligned with Sadr about the overall goal of opposing the US occupation—in other words, they were committed to the cause. However, this commitment to violently challenging the US led JAM fighters to oppose the ceasefire tactic as they did not want to put their arms down. Captured documents from AQI show similar dynamics. Deployed units were more violent than leaders preferred and justified this violent behavior by pointing to AQI's ideological foundations. For example, after battles in Baghdad in 2007, fighters wrote to the leadership to defend their use violence against Sunni allies by emphasizing that it was driven by their commitment to the cause: "We, in Baghdad, wish to show the blessed Emirate that we understand the Islamic religious law policy of our state in dealing with the other groups…They didn't conform to religious law. They didn't seek peace. They didn't confess of their crimes."[45]

3.2   Embeddedness and Shifting Enforcement to the Group

Perhaps the most obvious way that organizations can attempt to overcome the difficulties posed by monitoring and by followers' diverse preferences is with dedicated enforcement units or extreme punishments.[46] While this may be feasible in well-developed militaries, it is much harder in civil wars given insurgents' limited resources and the costliness of monitoring decentralized units.[47] Moreover,

43. Allan R. Millett, Williamson Murray, and Kenneth H. Watman, "The Effectiveness of Military Organizations," *International Security* 11, no. 1 (1986): 53; B. Oppenheim and M. Weintraub, *Learning How Not to Fire a Gun: The Impact of Combatant Training on Civilian Killings*, Working Paper (2015).

44. Wood, "Armed Groups and Sexual Violence"; Dara Cohen, "Explaining Sexual Violence During Civil War" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Stanford University, 2010).

45. Harmony Document: NMEC-2007-637011.

46. Jason Lyall, *Forced to Fight: Coercion, Blocking Detachments, and Tradeoffs in Military Effectiveness*, Working Paper (December 2015).

47. Johnston, "The Geography of Insurgent Organization and its Consequences for Civil Wars"; Jacob Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma: Managing Violent Covert Organizations* (Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013).

research underscores that harsh punishments—such as death threats to soldiers or their families—can dampen motivation and push individuals to competing organizations.[48] For example, evaluating Renamo in Mozambique, Young finds, "the control mechanisms applied to the conscripted soldiers (execution, deprivation and displacement) are poor methods of command and the high rate of desertions and the disinterest in Renamo political propaganda both paint a picture of an ineffective command system."[49] It is for this reason that many conventional armies move beyond individuals' motivations by creating "unit cohesion," recognizing that units are better disciplined when soldiers are tied to each other and the organization.[50] Following this same logic, I argue that organizations can better generate credible enforcement when they are embedded.

Embeddedness, in combination with resource control, positions organizations to turn violence on and off by allowing them to provide inducements *and* credibly enforce threats to withhold them. As introduced above, embedded social groups are composed of individuals that interact often, hold diverse relationships (spanning social and economic matters), and share common base beliefs and a rough equality of conditions. These are not networks joined together by a loosely shared ideology. Similarly, these are not "village-like" social networks where small pockets of the population share strong ties. Instead, members of embedded organizations have horizontal ties that do not stop at the outer wall of the village or with the last member of a clique.[51]

Most basically, as the literature reviewed in Section 2 illustrates, embeddedness can contribute to collective action by expanding the range of potential goods an organization can supply as these

48. Staniland, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place"; John A. Lynn, *The Bayonets of the Republic: Motivation and Tactics in the Army of Revolutionary France, 1791-94* (Westview Press, 1996); Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma*.

49. Eric T. Young, "The Victors and the Vanquished: The Role of Military Factors in the Outcome of Modern African Insurgencies," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 7, no. 2 (1996): 184.

50. See, for example, Henderson, *Cohesion, the Human Element in Combat*; In terms of insurgents, McLauchlin similarly finds evidence that units with shared norms are more likely to prevent individuals from deserting. McLauchlin, "Desertion and Collective Action in Civil Wars."

51. For a good explication of this point, see James Moody and Douglas R. White, "Structural Cohesion and Embeddedness: A Hierarchical Concept of Social Groups," *American Sociological Review* 68, no. 1 (2003): 103–127.

embedded social groups are imbued with non-pecuniary resources such as esteem, trust, legitimacy, or communal status.[52] However, as also uncovered in Section 2, such social goods will not be of use to an organization unless it leverages those embedded groups. When organizations cannot give embedded groups the key things they need to survive, their normative compliance will not be directed toward supporting the organization. Thus, I focus on how resource control positions organizations to leverage social ties, and in turn, how, once leveraged, the normative infrastructure of those embedded groups ameliorates the enforcement challenges that limit resource control alone.

When organizations directly and exclusively provide embedded groups with the key things they need to fight and live, members of the group are strongly incentivized to maintain access to these goods by ensuring good behavior and containing individuals' motivations. While some individuals may not respond to inducements alone, in embedded groups, they are far more likely to be motivated by pressure from peers. Thus, instead of threatening to withhold resources from individuals, organizations can make threats to the entire embedded group.

As a result, rather than having to identify and deal with each case of non-compliance, organizations can rely on their deployed units to self-police because these embedded groups have the normative power to regulate collective action by detecting and punishing non-compliers through the use of group norms and the threat of public shaming or expulsion. Thus, instead of having to expand their monitoring to collect information about individuals' behaviors, organizations can make credible threats with the information they already have: broad evidence about whether particular units were keeping cease-fires or failing to fight in the first place. In other words, organizations can side-step many information asymmetries by leveraging the normative infrastructure inherent in embedded social groups.[53]

---

52. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*; Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*; Scott Gates and Ragnhild Nordås, "Recruitment, Retention and Religion in Rebel Groups," in *American Political Science Association 2013 Annual Meeting* (Chicago, IL, 2013).

53. I thank Scott Gates for this observation.

Thus, organizations such as Hezbollah or the Taliban developed control of their fighters by building on their access to social and religious networks through the provision of goods. While other groups in Afghanistan and Lebanon had access to similar social ties and resources, they did not establish resource control so as to leverage those ties.[54] Similarly, while Palestinian Fatah has resource control, its diverse social base has meant that it often faces disagreements about when to use force, creating spoilers.[55] Shapiro also observes that despite Jemaah Islamiyah's direct control of payment and resources, the distinct nature of communities recruited by the group fomented defections. In particular, local elements took up arms in Ambon in 1999 despite the central leadership's explicit orders to not fight and threats to take away their "insurance coverage."[56]

To summarize, organizations need both resource control and embeddedness to turn violence on and off. With only resource control, organizations may have inducements, but they will be unable to enforce threats to withhold these resources. With embeddedness alone, while units can enforce, they are not incentivized to direct their normative compliance toward the leadership as leaders cannot give the embedded group the key things it needs to survive and fight.

Finally, like material endowments, organizations that cannot import pre-existing social endowments can create such relationships through indoctrination or training. As Kier observes: "Militaries take pride in bringing together disparate individuals, submerging individual identities, and creating a group identity."[57] While insurgents may be limited in terms of the time or territory involved in such processes, the rise of groups like AQI and, more recently, the Islamic State show that it is not uncom-

54. Magnus Ranstorp, "The Strategy and Tactics of Hizballah's Current 'Lebanonization Process'," *Mediterranean Politics* 3, no. 1 (1998): 103–134; Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (Columbia University Press, 2009).

55. Jacob Shapiro, "The Terrorist's Challenge: Security, Efficiency, Control" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Stanford University, 2007), 64; Berman, *Radical, Religious, and Violent*, 140-45.

56. Shapiro, "The Terrorist's Challenge: Security, Efficiency, Control," 63; International Crisis Group, *Jihad in Central Sulawesi*, Asia Report 74 (February 2004).

57. Kier, "Homosexuals in the U.S. Military," 21-22.

mon. Below, I show how the Viet Minh did exactly this.[58]

3.3 Why Resource Control and Embeddedness Only Explain Whether Organizations Can Turn Violence On or Off

While embedded organizations that have established resource control will be positioned to turn violence on and off, according to the logic presented above, their control of other types of behavior by soldiers will remain limited. Such organizations are able to discipline embedded units that do not follow ceasefire orders or do not fight when ordered because compliance with such orders is apparent since leaders only need to observe whether units are fighting or not. By moving compliance from the individual to the group, organizations with resource control and embeddedness have side-stepped some information asymmetries, allowing them to turn violence on and off.

But, leaders still face significant information asymmetries when evaluating compliance with orders to carry out other types of activities. Given their separation from deployed units, leaders are ill-positioned to carefully observe behavior when there are multiple and conflicting accounts from fighters on the ground. Even when outcomes can be observed, it is difficult to tell if these were due to non-compliance or extenuating circumstances. For example, leaders cannot know if civilians were targeted intentionally, or if it occurred as collateral damage. Similarly, leaders cannot be sure if a particular attack failed because soldiers did not try very hard, or because of variables beyond their control. As Shapiro observes, difficulty in monitoring makes it hard for leaders "to detect whether a failed mission was due to insufficient effort or just bad luck."[59]

What is more, unit members are often unwilling to report each other's deviant behavior.[60] As the

---

58. See, for example, Oppenheim and Weintraub, *Learning How Not to Fire a Gun: The Impact of Combatant Training on Civilian Killings*; Elisabeth J. Wood, "The Social Processes of Civil War: The Wartime Transformation of Social Networks," *Annual Review of Political Science* 11, no. 1 (2008): 539–561.

59. Shapiro, *The Terrorist's Dilemma*, 108.

60. Donna Winslow, "Misplaced Loyalties: The Role of Military Culture in the Breakdown of Discipline in Two Peace Operations," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 6, no. 3 (2004); Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*, 131-32, 146-47.

noted above, because of how varied fighters' preferences are, individuals and units often have many reasons to use violence in support of local objectives, giving them reasons to mislead the central leadership. As the Viet Minh case uncovers, the Viet Minh leadership was aware that deployed units were obscuring their behavior in real-time and not sharing full information about operational planning and outcomes. Similarly, captured internal assessment documents from AQI admonish that a consistent problem in disciplining deployed "emirs" was that they were "hiding many facts regarding their sectors [and were] afraid of giving accounts because of their failure. "hiding many facts regarding their sectors [and were] afraid of giving accounts because of their failure."[61]

When units know their compliance with orders cannot be monitored, they are not incentivized to self-police because threats to withhold resources are not credible. Illustratively, Axelrod finds that the "live and let live" system of trench warfare during WWI was possible because the command was unable to observe and thus punish deviant behavior by the units on the line:

> With few exceptions, the headquarters could enforce any orders that they could directly monitor. Thus the headquarters were able to conduct large battles by ordering the men to leave their trenches and risk their lives in charging the enemy positions. But between large battles, they were not able to monitor their orders to keep up the pressure. After all, it was hard for a senior officer to determine who was shooting to kill, and who was shooting with an eye to avoiding retaliation. The soldiers became expert at defeating the monitoring system.[62]

To gain additional control beyond turning violence on and off, organizations need to more deeply tie their members to the organization by attempting to modify their preferences.[63] Militaries often achieve this greater level of commitment through military and political training and the generation of well-trusted and motivated lower level officers and non-commissioned officers.[64] In such cases, organizations have drastically changed their relationship with their fighters and can worry less about

---

61. Harmony Document: NMEC-2008-612449, 20.

62. Robert Axelrod, *Evolution of Cooperation*, First Edition (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 81-82.

63. See, for example, Oppenheim and Weintraub, *Learning How Not to Fire a Gun: The Impact of Combatant Training on Civilian Killings*; Wood, "Armed Groups and Sexual Violence."

64. For example, Henderson, *Cohesion, the Human Element in Combat*; Edward Shils and Morris Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 12, no. 2 (1948): 280–315.

Table 1. Predicting if Organizations Can Turn Violence On and Off

	Embedded		Not Embedded	
Resource Control	**Able**		**Unable**	
	Inducements	*Enforcement*	*Inducements*	*Enforcement*
	+	+	+	-
No Resource Control	**Unable**		**Unable**	
	Inducements	*Enforcement*	*Inducements*	*Enforcement*
	-	+	-	-

information asymmetries. Nonetheless, organizations *do not need* more than resource control and embeddedness to control when—as opposed to how—violence is employed.

3.4   Observable Implications

The preceding theory generates the central predictions illustrated in Table 1. These are probabilistic; groups in each box are more likely to act as described. Within an organization, units may be more or less embedded or leaders may have higher or lower levels of resource control. As discussed below, organizations can move between the boxes as levels of resource control or embeddedness shift.

Organizations that are embedded *and* have resource control can provide inducements to their followers by giving them the key things they need to fight and live. They are able to threaten to withhold these resources from the entire group, motivating deployed units to take care of enforcement by self-policing. For organizations that only have resource control, while they can provide inducements, threats to withhold them are not credible due to the challenges of tracking down and disciplining *each* individual act of non-compliance. For organizations that are embedded but lack resource con-

22

trol, while their members will share a normative infrastructure, the organization will have no way of leveraging it since embedded groups must seek key goods beyond the organization. Finally, organizations with neither embeddedness nor resource control are poorly connected to their units and those units do not share social ties binding them together.

In sum, this logic predicts that organizations' ability to turn violence on and off should not co-vary with structural conditions. Access to resources alone will not result in compliance with orders to start or stop using violence. Well-supplied organizations will only be able to take advantage of those resources when they have put in place resource control and use that control to leverage socially embedded units. On the other hand, organizations will not be able to reap the benefits of strong social ties without explicitly leveraging them with resource control.

Beyond these expectations, the theory produces a set of other observable implications that differentiate it from alternative explanations:

First, since organizations should not be limited by the extent or type of existing endowments, we should observe organizations generating resource control and/or embeddedness. In particular, there should be evidence that organizations are expressly seeking to generate such institutions with the goal of gaining greater control of their fighters' behavior.

Second, if the mechanisms I present are operating, groups with only resource control and embeddedness should be able to turn violence on and off because compliance is easily observable, but they should not be able to control *how* violence is used, whether that means not attacking civilians or carrying out particular types of operations. These organizations should not be able to control such less observable behaviors because they have not moved beyond resource control and embeddedness to further leverage their units through mechanisms like intense training or a trusted officer cadre. Thus, when behavior cannot be observed or verified, meaning that threats to withhold resources are not

credible, deployed units should not fear losing access to resources and will not use group norms to self-police. Evidence of this observable implication separates the theory from explanations that focus on the charisma or legitimacy of leaders. If commitment to a leader explained soldiers' behavior, fighters would obey all orders irrespective of whether or not their behavior could be directly observed.

Finally, if resource control and embeddedness are the key causal factors explaining control of turning violence on and off, currently studied internal characteristics such as the number of factions or pre-existing disagreements should only influence whether organizations can turn violence on and off in the absence of resource control and embeddedness. Even when there are factions within an organization, if the central leadership retains resource control and embeddedness, than these factions should not stop the organization from turning violence on and off. As organization theorists point out, factions or cliques are common in formal organizations, it is how organizations manage these divisions that influences behavior.[65]

3.5   Scope Conditions

This theory applies to militant organizations in sub-state conflicts that seek to use violence with the goal of either joining the state, creating a new state, or deposing the current government. Such organizations are not using violence solely to provoke fear or pursue criminal goals. In addition, the theory applies to specific organizations, not broader movements—so it makes predictions about organizations such as al-Qaeda in Iraq or JAM rather than the broader Iraqi insurgency.

The theory makes predictions about whether organizations already fighting in a conflict can turn violence on and off. It does not attempt to explain how a movement becomes violent in the first place, why members of a society turn to violence, or why individuals join a particular organization. Instead,

---

65. Philip Selznick, *Leadership in Administration: A Sociological Interpretation* (University of California Press, 1957), 93-94; W. Richard Scott, *Organizations: Rational, Natural, and Open Systems,* 3rd ed. (Prentice Hall, 1991), 175.

it focuses on whether fighters who have joined an organization follow orders to turn violence on and off.

In this context, the theory applies to groups irrespective of their underlying motivating principles, whether nationalism, religion, separatism, ideology, ethnicity, or greed. While these factors may influence the overall strategic approach or predispositions of fighters, as noted above, even in organizations with very committed fighters, members have diverse preferences that separate leaders from deployed fighters. As a result, leaders should still need resource control and embeddedness to ensure that units follow orders about tactics.

4   Testing the Theory

The theory identifies particular mechanisms that connect insurgent organizations with their followers. Thus, assessing the theory requires detailed information about these organizations. Further, to rule out the role of structural factors, I must show that organizational factors vary independently from structural factors. To demonstrate that the mechanics of the theory are operative in particular organizations and across a range of cases, I conduct in-depth analysis of Jaysh al-Mahdi over a five year period and then demonstrate that the same mechanisms are active in a very different conflict environment by comparing the Viet Minh with other organizations in Vietnam from 1945-1948. As Johnston notes, such within-country, organization-level analysis "is propitious for comparing potential causal mechanisms and controlling particular variables."[66]

I conduct these structured case comparisons by drawing on evidence from press reports, intelligence analyses, first-person accounts, and archival documents. Using this evidence, I trace the processes that connected each organization's features with whether or not it could turn violence on and

---

66. Johnston, "The Geography of Insurgent Organization and its Consequences for Civil Wars," 119.

off. Moreover, because evidence about the particular reasons that individuals did or did not comply can be challenging to collect—not only do organizations withhold information, but there are limited opportunities to speak with fighters—I carefully evaluate each of the three additional observable implications that differentiate the theory from other explanations.[67] JAM and the Viet Minh are good tests of the theory. First, they are "easy" tests for existing explanations and hard tests for the theory. Since JAM was embedded, explanations focusing on social ties would expect it to be "cohesive." On the other hand, since the Viet Minh was not embedded, but did have access to resources, existing theories would expect this organization to "fragment" into a set of disjointed units seeking personal profit.

Second, this approach holds constant key structural variables over time and within the conflict zones. For JAM, during the 2003-2004 and 2005-2008 periods, US and Iraqi forces used similar tactics and JAM possessed the same goals—namely US withdrawal. Further, JAM had operated in similar areas and faced similar foes, both in the government and resistance. In Vietnam, the Viet Minh was one of many armed organizations. Each of these competing organizations faced a similar French foe, had similar resources and external support, and had access to similar types of territory.

As a result, I am able to show that, unlike existing explanations, the theory is able to explain each organization's behavior over extended time periods. This is despite the coterie of differences between Iraq and Vietnam in terms of religion, state strength, ethnicity, technology, the ideologies involved, the terrain and geographic span of conflicts, the state structure in place preceding the conflicts, and the international circumstances accompanying each of the conflicts.

---

67. For the importance of specifiying and testing observable implications to causally separate competing explanations in the complex environment of civil war, see Jeffrey T. Checkel, "Transnational Dynamics of Civil War," in *Transnational Dynamics of Civil War*, ed. Jeffrey T. Checkel (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3–30.

4.1 Embeddedness, Resource Control, and Jaysh al-Mahdi from 2003-2008

JAM is rooted in the movement of Muqtada al-Sadr's father, Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, who espoused a non-quietest approach, calling for the removal of Saddam Hussein and establishment of an Islamic government. Throughout the 1990s, he built a strong persona, patronage networks, and garnered support amongst Iraq's large and underprivileged Shiite community. This community was united around shared religious views, the hierarchy of religious cadre, shared interactions, similar economic backgrounds, and a shared experience of persecution under Saddam Hussein.[68]

The commitment to the Sadrist trend did not fade after Sadiq's death. In 2003, a young Shiite told Cockburn after the fall of Sadr city to US forces: "We believed Sadr II [Mohammed Sadiq al-Sadr, or the "White Lion"] was like the Prophet Mohammed because he did so many things for our community. We, his followers, had a sense of failure and guilt that we had not been able to stop him being killed, so we felt it our duty to support his son."[69] In this context, that son, Muqtada al-Sadr, took the leadership of a nascent movement rooted in the social networks fostered by his father.

Despite being embedded, JAM was unable to turn violence on and off in 2004. JAM only gained this level of control after generating resource control. Further, the cases show evidence highlighting each of the theory's observable implications. First, after 2004, Sadr explicitly sought resource control by joining the government and opting into social service ministries and then putting in place systems to distribute those goods. Second, while JAM had significant social cache and resource control, its leadership was only able to turn violence on and off; it was unable to control who soldiers targeted with violence. Finally, even though there were many internal divisions, or "factions," within JAM, with resource control and embeddedness, Sadr was still able to turn violence on and off.

---

68. Yusri Hazran, "The Rise of Politicized Shi'ite Religiosity and the Territorial State in Iraq and Lebanon," *The Middle East Journal* 64, no. 4 (2010): 521–541.

69. Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada Al-Sadr and the Battle for the Future of Iraq* (Simon and Schuster, 2008), 117.

Moreover, there was variation in JAM's behavior even though, throughout the period studied, it operated in the same general areas, recruited from similar communities, and faced competition from other Shiite groups, Sunni militias, and the Iraqi government—in fact, this competition was most pronounced during 2007 when JAM was able to keep the ceasefire. Further, JAM faced similar pressure from the US in 2004 and 2007. Though JAM was given some leeway when it joined the political process in 2005, the US began conducting aggressive campaigns against JAM and other conflict actors as of late 2006. I explicitly discuss alternative explanations in Section 5.

4.1.1   2003-2005: Embedded without Resource Control.

Krohley observes that, following the US invasion, JAM was one of only a few embedded groups:

> [W]ith the White Lion's son, Muqtada, at the resurgent Sadrist movement's helm…the Sadrists possessed a rare and valuable commodity that would fuel their ascent: the ideological bond that had been forged among the masses of Iraq's Shi'a underclass by Mohammad Sadiq al-Sadr. On a national landscape where the populace had been systematically atomized and depoliticized over a period of decades, the Sadrists' ability to build from a genuine, grassroots mass-base was an extraordinary asset.[70]

However, Sadr's ability to directly provide goods—such as local charity, payment, and weapons—was limited.[71] During 2004, JAM members were not paid and were forced to buy their own weapons and provide their own transportation. Similarly, in May 2003, Sadr infamously issued a fatwa allowing looters and thieves to keep their spoils as long as they paid requisite Islamic taxes on such loot.[72]

Moreover, Sadr did not exclusively provide any goods that he could distribute. Other followers of his father, including Muhammad al-Yacoubi, Ayatollah Kazem al-Haeri, Hasan al-Sarqi, Abu Dura, and Qais Khazali had stronger religious credentials.[73] Each of these factional leaders had limited networks of mosques and clerics following them, allowing them to dispense information and guidance at Friday

---

70. Nicholas Krohley, *The Death of the Mehdi Army: The Rise, Fall, and Revival of Iraq's Most Powerful Militia* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 61.

71. International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Muqtada Al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?*, Middle East Report 55 (July 2006), 18-19.

72. Cockburn, *Muqtada Al-Sadr and the Battle for the Future of Iraq*, 130.

73. In 2003, Sadr was at best a Mujtahid, allowing him to interpret Islamic law, but not placing him in the position to be emulated. He was not known as a dedicated scholar and definitely lacked his father's status of Ayatollah. M. Cochrane, *The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement*, Iraq Report 12 (The Institute for the Study of War, 2009), 14-15; Anthony Shadid, *Night Draws Near: Iraq's People in the Shadow of America's War* (Macmillan, 2005), 187-93.

sermons and through local offices.[74] Importantly, while these factions existed throughout the time period studied, their relative importance varied based on the organizational attributes of JAM. Beyond competitors within the Mahdist trend, Sadr could not match Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani's ability to provide for the broader Shiite community.

JAM Conduct 2003-2005. Even though JAM was one of the few embedded organizations in Iraq, the theory predicts that it would be unable to turn violence on and off as it had not leveraged those social ties with resource control.

At the turn of 2004, the US shut down JAM's newspaper, *al-Hawza* on March 28 and then arrested a top Sadr aide.[75] Sadr attempted to respond by treading a fine-line and using "just enough of military challenge."[76] The strategy to limit the deployment of force did not play out. Following mass riots in Shiite strongholds, JAM forces were engaged in a full-scale offensive across six cities. Though Sadr was able to kick-start this offensive given his position in the Shiite network, he quickly lost control of the movement. As Cockburn illustrates: "It was the strength of Muqtada that he could mobilize the Shia masses, the millions of angry and very poor young men whom nobody else in Iraq represented. His weakness was that he could not control them."[77]

Following heavy losses, Sadr attempted to craft a ceasefire but could not garner consensus within JAM. As Knights and Williams conclude from interviews with local Iraqis and British intelligence officials, during this period, "the centralized leadership's inability to stop an uprising became clear: the Jaish al-Mahdi did not answer to centralized command. In a sign of desperation, Sadr secretly requested Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani to issue a statement to demobilize the Jaish al-Mahdi."[78] Despite

---

74. David Patel, *Ayatollahs on the Pareto Frontier: The Institutional Bases of Shiite Religious Authority in Iraq*, Working Paper (Cornell University/Stanford University, 2005).

75. Cockburn, *Muqtada Al-Sadr and the Battle for the Future of Iraq*, 145.

76. Cordesman and Davies, *Iraq's Insurgency and the Road to Civil Conflict*, 97-99.

77. Cockburn, *Muqtada Al-Sadr and the Battle for the Future of Iraq*, 147-48.

78. M. Knights and E. Williams, *The Calm Before the Storm: The British Experience in Southern Iraq* (Washington Institute

reaching out to the revered Shiite leader, Sistani refused to intervene.[79]

Though Sadr declared a truce, his troops did not adhere to the order—despite acknowledging him as their leader. Very few JAM fighters returned home and put down their arms. Cockburn interviewed one member who asserted that "Muqtada gave an order saying everybody had to go back to his family…But many of our men stayed inside Najaf saying that the truce was just a lie, and they also moved into nearby regions such as Mashkab, Haidaria, and Abbasia."[80] As such, violence completely resumed in August as JAM members attacked coalition and Iraqi forces.[81]

With the resumption of conflict, JAM suffered as many as 1,000 casualties.[82] Sadr unsuccessfully ordered his fighters to stand down and again appealed to Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani who, this time, intervened and persuaded the fighters to stand down.[83] The agreement resulted in the demilitarization of Najaf and Kufa, forcing Sadr's departure from his home in Najaf. Summing up the course of the two conflicts, Cockburn observes that the "outright winner of the August battle in Najaf was Grand Ayatollah Sistani, who showed his immense authority over the Iraqi Shia."[84]

How was Sistani able to convince Sadr's followers to stand down? While Sistani did not advocate violence, his distribution of resources to Shiites placed him in the position to turn violence "off." Of all the religious leaders in post-Saddam Iraq, Sistani had by far the most centralized distribution of religious and material resources, relying on an extensive mosque network and access to significant

for Near East Policy, 2007), 18.

79. Alex Berenson, "U.S. Forces Clash With Rebel Cleric's Militia in Najaf," *The New York Times*, August 5, 2004, nytimes.com; Nimrod Raphaeli, "Understanding Muqtada al-Sadr," *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2004, 33–42.

80. Cockburn, *Muqtada Al-Sadr and the Battle for the Future of Iraq*, 153; See also, Edward Wong, "Clashes in Najaf and Kufa Put the Cease-Fire in Peril," *The New York Times*, May 30, 2004, nytimes.com.

81. Scott Baklauf and Dan Murphy, "Uneasy Truce Evaporates in Najaf," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 6, 2004,

82. T. Walsh, "The Fight for Kufa: Task Force 2-37 Armor Defeats Al-Sadr's Militia," *Armor Magazine*, 2004, 30.

83. Rajiv Chandrasekaran, "Top Cleric Brokers Deal To End Battle In Najaf," *Washington Post*, August 27, 2004, washingtonpost.com; Michael Howard and Brian Whitaker, "Sistani's Intervention Pulls Najaf Back from the Brink," *The Guardian*, August 27, 2004, guardian.co.uk; Cockburn, *Muqtada Al-Sadr and the Battle for the Future of Iraq*, 162.

84. Cockburn, *Muqtada Al-Sadr and the Battle for the Future of Iraq*, 162-63.

religious tax income.[85] As Patel observes, "Sistani inherited the essential infrastructure of his network from his mentor, Ayatollah al-Khoei, who built an impressive network of followers in Shiite communities…Sistani's agents, therefore, are experienced, respected in their local communities, and well-funded."[86] Nonetheless, Sistani did not build a military apparatus, instead remaining true to his quietest tendencies. By contrast, after 2005, Sadr sought to bolster JAM's military apparatus by instituting resource control.

4.1.2 Mid-2005 to 2008: Resource Control and Leadership Embeddedness

During this period, working through three channels, Sadr made significant progress in positioning JAM's leadership to directly and exclusively provide resources. First, by joining the government in 2005, Sadr took control of a number of ministries—JAM had 30 lawmakers and six Cabinet ministers. Sadr explicitly sought out ministries that would contribute to resource control. Unlike other political rivals, JAM did not seek "high-value" ministries such as interior, oil, or defense. Instead, Sadr sought ministries in health, human services, and transportation, allowing for the capture and provision of resources that people needed to survive.[87] These services were directly distributed via Sadrist neighborhood offices (*Maktab al-Sayyid al-Shahid*) where citizens had to access them.[88] From these offices, JAM distributed jobs, food, and other social support. Illustrating how dependent followers were on JAM, those who received jobs were required to donate 50,000 dinars (about $40) while simply being a JAM member required a 10,000 dinar monthly donation—these payments guaranteed that if a militia member was killed in combat, their family would receive assistance.[89]

---

85. Babak Rahimi, "Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and the Democratization of Post-Saddam Iraq," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 8, no. 4 (2004): 13.

86. David Patel, "Islam, Information, and Social Order: The Strategic Role of Religion in Muslim Societies" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Stanford University, 2007), 64.

87. Melani Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon* (Cornell University Press, 2014), Chapter 7; International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Muqtada Al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?*, 14.

88. Cockburn, *Muqtada Al-Sadr and the Battle for the Future of Iraq*, 271.

89. Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism*, 202.

As a part of this process, Sadr placed many JAM members in the police and to a lesser extent the army, making them dependent upon him for employment and goods.[90] Recognizing the importance of JAM's provision of supplies, one US trainer observed, "Who's feeding the Iraqi Army? Nobody. So JAM will come around and give them food and water…We try to capture hearts and minds, well, JAM has done that. They're further along than us."[91]

The second change was the increasing role of Iran in supporting JAM with weapons and even limited training.[92] While Iran later tried to marginalize Sadr by directing this support to JAM factions, during this period, Iran worked closely with Sadr and Akram al-Kabi, the head of JAM military operations, and his associate, Qais Khazali.[93] Like with resources gained from joining the government, Sadr distributed these goods from Iran directly through the neighborhood offices.

Finally, a narrative emerged venerating the 2004 operations in the Shiite tradition of resistance, particularly as disillusionment with the US occupation grew.[94] Thus, Sadr was able to make up for some of his lack of religious status by serving as the most widely known cleric to openly oppose the occupation.[95] He took advantage of the *Maktab al-Sayyid al-Shahid* to provide religious guidance and justice. Sadr created the Mahdist Institute to teach basic principles of faith and established a code of conduct enforced by a Judgment Committee which disciplined those violating the rules.[96]

In short, JAM remained embedded while establishing direct and exclusive provision of key resources. Because it had resource control, JAM members were dependent on the organization. As Berman

---

90. International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Muqtada Al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?*, 4-5.

91. Tom Lasseter, "Mahdi Army Gains Strength Through Unwitting Aid of U.S.," *McClatchy Newspapers*, February 1, 2007, mcclatchydc.com.

92. Kimberly Kagan, *Iran's Proxy War Against the United States and Iraq*, Iraq Report (The Institute for the Study of War, August 2007).

93. "Iraq's Al-Mahdi Army Restructures, Gains New Commander," *BBC Monitoring Middle East*, May 23, 2007, lexisnexis.com; Cochrane, *The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement*, 17-19.

94. Anthony Shadid, "For Rebuilders of Sadr City, Gratitude Tainted by Mistrust," *Washington Post*, December 17, 2004, washingtonpost.com.

95. International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Muqtada Al-Sadr: Spoiler or Stabiliser?*, 12-15.

96. Ibid., 13, 20.

observes, during this period, "al-Sadr's forces became the most reliable providers of basic services."[97]

As a result, "with its grassroots presences at the neighborhood and village level, it was easy for representatives of [JAM] to identify supporters, even marginal sympathizers who had not undertaken highly costly or risky activities on behalf of the organization. A Sadrist official…noted that the movement branch offices relied on personal knowledge of which families are loyal to the organization in determining whom to reward with social benefits."[98]

JAM Conduct Mid-2005 to 2008. With the establishment of resource control, the theory predicts that JAM would be able to enforce ceasefires and ensure that its soldiers used violence when ordered, but not control how violence was used since JAM had not further leveraged their followers with indoctrination or lower-level cadre. This prediction is notable: if Sadr was simply becoming more legitimate and accepted by his followers, they would follow all orders, not follow some orders and defy others. Further, the theory predicts that the factions that had been influential in 2004 would fall in-line during this period.

Sadr re-mobilized JAM after the February 22, 2006 attacks on the Askariya shrine in Samarra. During this period, Sadr reconciled with the Khazali faction while other factions decreased in importance or simply blended back into JAM.[99] Sadr's forces continued to use violence against US forces as well as other Sunni and Shiite actors.[100] Overall, 2006 saw a marked uptick in sectarian violence and population movements that allowed JAM to expand throughout Baghdad.[101]

Nonetheless, during 2007, Sadr turned violence off twice. By the end of 2006, US forces were gearing up to confront JAM, referring to the organization as "The group that is currently having the

97. Berman, *Radical, Religious, and Violent*, 113; Cockburn, *Muqtada Al-Sadr and the Battle for the Future of Iraq*, 171-72.
98. Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism*, 203.
99. Cochrane, *The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement*.
100. Julian E. Barnes, "Sadr Army Is Called Top Threat In Iraq," *Los Angeles Times*, December 19, 2006, latimes.com.
101. Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman, and Jacob Shapiro, "Testing the Surge: Why Violence Declined in Iraq in 2007," *International Security* 37, no. 1 (2012): 7–40.

greatest negative affect on the security situation in Iraq."[102] At the beginning of 2007, the US launched the Baghdad Security Plan and emphasized that it would launch a full-scale offensive against JAM if it did not stand down.[103] Sadr responded to this pressure from the US and was able to stand down JAM's forces. As a result, the period following the January stand-down resulted in a significant reduction in violence.[104]

After Sadr ordered his soldiers to resume fighting during the summer of 2007, JAM forces engaged in brutal conflicts with other Shiite parties, mainly the Badr Organization. This violence came to a head in August of 2007 when clashes near the Imam Ali shrine in Karbala killed fifty civilians and wounded 200 others.[105] Responding to the damages that these types of attacks were having and fearing a spiral of violence, Sadr once again called on his militia to stand down and issued explicit warnings that deployed units violating the agreement would be punished.

One JAM member noted that these threats were motivating, even to soldiers with "rackets on the side," "a member excommunicated by the sheikh immediately loses his immunity…If a member is expelled for two months, for example, he must survive during that period without Mahdi Army support or protection."[106] Similarly, after the ceasefire order, JAM halted the provision of martyr and pension payments to the families of soldiers' killed in combat.[107]

The success of this stand down is the puzzle with which the paper began. As one US military official incorrectly predicted at the time, "As far as Sadr, I wouldn't put too much stock into what he says…He's been spending most of his time in Iran and, because of that, probably has little control over some of

---

102. U.S. Department of Defense, *Report to Congress: Measuring Stability and Security in Iraq*, Report to Congress (November 2006), 19.

103. Kimberly Kagan, *Enforcing the Law: The Baghdad Security Plan Begins*, Iraq Report (The Institute for the Study of War, February 2007), 8.

104. Cordesman, *Iraq's Sectarian and Ethnic Violence and Its Evolving Insurgency*.

105. Cochrane, *The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement*, 29.

106. International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists and the Surge*, 8,16.

107. Ibid.

the more militant factions of the Mahdi Army…As the leadership has been picked off, so has his influence."[108] Nonetheless, JAM did stand down as fighters continued rely on JAM for employment, justice, weapons, and welfare. Factional leaders who had allowed their soldiers to target civilians against Sadr's wishes maintained the ceasefire. For example, as discussed below, the al-Araji brothers had been assassinating and hassling political rivals during 2006 and early 2007. However, they actively enforced the ceasefire, personally reading the command to their soldiers in August 2007.[109]

Obeying the ceasefire was not an easy choice for JAM members. Footsoldiers and mid-level commanders lost significant territory and personal prestige which had come from their victories in 2006. Moreover, by putting their weapons down, they were defenseless against attacks from other Shiite militants—some higher-ranking JAM members were even forced to flee Baghdad fearing retribution.[110] They also faced attacks from Sunni tribal groups that had been empowered by the Sons of Iraq program, a central part of the Surge.[111] As a result, compliance came even though many fighters openly disagreed with the decision to put down their arms. The International Crisis Group interviewed a number of followers abiding by the ceasefire who expressed both the costliness of the ceasefire, but also their commitment to Sadr:

> Muqtada al-Sadr is wise; he does not want to provoke fitna[i.e. internal conflict]…That said, I believe our problems will never be solved. We are simply awaiting a signal, an order from Muqtada al-Sadr, to burn them all [*another added*]: We are impatiently waiting for Muqtada al-Sadr to announce a resumption of the Mahdi Army's activities. You'll see what we'll do with those…The only reason we are not reacting now to Badr's attacks is that we respect Muqtada al-Sadr's decision. The day before yesterday, a Karbala delegation went to Najaf to see Muqtada al-Sadr and discuss the situation of Sadrists in Karbala. They told him that the Badrists were persecuting them. Muqtada al-Sadr replied: 'Be patient. We will be stronger than before.' For now, Muqtada al-Sadr's strategy is to urge calm.[112]

There was one notable exception to this compliance: the Special Groups. Sadr did not have resource control over these units because Iran was training them and providing significant resources

---

108. Joshua Partlow and Saad Sarhan, "Sadr Orders 'Freeze' on Militia Actions; Iraqi Cleric's Edict Comes After Killings At Shiite Festival," *The Washington Post*, August 30, 2007, washingtonpost.com.
109. Cochrane, *The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement*, 26, 29.
110. International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists and the Surge*.
111. Biddle, Friedman, and Shapiro, "Testing the Surge: Why Violence Declined in Iraq in 2007."
112. International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists and the Surge*, 14.

such as explosives and communications technology.[113] As Kagan, Cochrane, and Knights detail, Iran sought out these factions in late 2006 as they "diversified" from supporting Sadr.[114] Indeed, the goals of Iran were often at odds with those of mainstream JAM.[115] This division was illustrated in May 2007 when Sadr purged Akram al-Kabi, who had been the head of JAM military operations, accusing him of allegiance with Iran.[116] The Special Groups, under the command of al-Kabi, directly supported by Iran, carried out coordinated campaigns against US and Iraqi forces and "by late 2007, it was clear that Iranian-backed groups were the primary driver of violence in the capital."[117]

Despite the Special Groups, the ceasefire continued through the beginning of 2008 and was extended by Sadr for an additional six months in February. After some brief skirmishes in March of 2008, Sadr re-imposed the ceasefire. The ceasefire held and Sadr's forces have basically remained frozen since, allowing him to develop an increasingly robust political and social presence.[118]

Wile Sadr was able to rely on his fighters to fight when ordered, throughout this period, he faced significant challenges in controlling *how* they employed violence. Significant targeting of civilians during this period came despite guidance from JAM to its units to limit civilian casualties. This dynamic was evidenced by the use of torture by deployed JAM fighters. One member told the International Crisis Group: "[Sadr] had received numerous complaints concerning the Mahdi Army's behavior, including from parents whose sons were killed. Some parents had proof, such as pictures of their sons tortured to death by the Mahdi Army."[119] As Krohley observes from his time in-country, "Although

---

113. Michael Knights, "The Evolution of Iran's Special Groups in Iraq," *CTC Sentinel* 3, nos. 11-12 (2010).

114. Kagan, *Iran's Proxy War Against the United States and Iraq*; Knights, "The Evolution of Iran's Special Groups in Iraq"; M. Cochrane, *Special Groups Regenerate*, Iraq Report (The Institute for the Study of War, 2008).

115. See, for example, Ned Parker, "Cracks in Sadr's Army," *Los Angeles Times*, April 3, 2007, latimes.com.

116. "Iraq's Al-Mahdi Army Restructures, Gains New Commander."

117. Cochrane, *The Fragmentation of the Sadrist Movement*, 31.

118. Michael David Clark and Renad Mansour, "Rethinking Sadr: From Firebrand to Iraqi Statesman?," November 20, 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=57279; Babah Rahimi, "The Return of Moqtada al-Sadr and the Revival of the Mahdi Army," *CTC Sentinel* 3, no. 6 (2010).

119. International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists and the Surge*, 16.

the Sadrists' ability to channel legions of able-bodied young men into the Mehdi Army had been, and would remain, central to the movement's advances, the radicalism and brutality of their most ardent followers vexed efforts at reform."[120]

This was despite significant efforts to track down these extreme members. This included the use of harsh punishments and attempts at careful monitoring by the "Sadrist Justice Committee" and "Golden Brigades." However, as the theory predicts, these institutions were unable to modify soldiers' behaviors. As relayed by a Sistani cleric, "An old friend, a Sadrist religious student, told me that Muqtada runs prisons in the Najaf cemetery, which abound with Mahdi Army troublemakers. But it makes no difference. There are so many of them within the Sadrist current."[121] A Sadrist officer lamented that as JAM leaders sought to ensure that fighters followed specific orders, such as "clear orders not to attack Sunni mosques…we discovered how difficult it had become to control them."[122]

In sum, the theory explains how JAM was able to keep a costly ceasefire in 2007 by using resource control to provide—and threaten to withhold—key resources and enforcing such threats by relying on JAM's embeddedness. Further, it explains how resource control generated compliance for much of the organization, but not for the Special Groups, over which Sadr did not have resource control. Nonetheless, the range and depth of critical resources provided by JAM—such as steady employment and welfare support—allowed it to maintain control of the vast majority of its movement despite efforts by Iran to wrestle control from Sadr.

4.2   Embeddedness, Resource Control, and the Viet Minh

This section demonstrates how the theory generalizes beyond JAM to explain similar behavior across organizations in southern Vietnam during the First Indochina War. In particular, I trace the develop-

---

120. Krohley, *The Death of the Mehdi Army*, 68.
121. International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Civil War, the Sadrists and the Surge*, 8.
122. Ibid.

ment of the Viet Minh in the south during the 1946-1948 period in comparison with two other conflict actors, the QDD Front and the Hoa Hao. This period began as WWII ended and Vietnam was handed over to the British in the south and the Chinese in the north. The British quickly returned control to the French, who, after a long period of colonial rule, had been ousted by the Japanese. The French returned to North Vietnam by the end of 1946. In both regions, the French faced a large set of resistance organizations including religious and nationalist groups.

One of those groups was the Viet Minh. While the Viet Minh did become powerful, it developed from a shattered resistance movement and had little external support. Though weak in north Vietnam, it was even weaker in the south. In the south, it was confronted with the full force of the French, was in competition with many other groups, had fewer resources than its competitors—that were supplied by either the French or Chinese—and had no access to pre-existing social foundations. Due to these highly unfavorable conditions, this brief test focuses on the south. The south provides the hardest test for the theory because the theory predicts that to turn violence on and off, the Viet Minh would have to generate resource control and embeddedness.

The Viet Minh was able to do so, allowing it to keep a costly ceasefire in 1947. On the other hand, the nationalist QDD Front, thought to be France's strongest challenger, was unable to turn violence on and off because, while it had resource control, it did not generate embeddedness. Similarly, the Hoa Hao, an embedded group supported by the French, did not generate resource control and was unable to turn violence on and off. Beyond these predictions, the cases show evidence of each of the observable implications. The Viet Minh leadership was explicit about how, and why, they would create resource control and embeddedness. In addition, like JAM, the Viet Minh could turn violence on and off but was unable to control how violence was used.

4.2.1   Embeddedness and Resource Control

Rather than being socially embedded, the Viet Minh had to recruit from "multitudes of small-group attachments."[123] Thus, the Viet Minh needed to generate groups of individuals with shared norms and experiences. They did this with the establishment of mass-participation organizations. As McAlister underscores, this was done explicitly: "these groups were organized in such a way that they went beyond being units for village action [and] reinforced their role of restructuring village society by giving them a meaning in the larger context of the tumultuous events of the August Revolution."[124] The Viet Minh also built social connections via education programs. Students would read works by Ho Chi Minh and the sessions would end with "cultural tests."[125] Elliott, studying villages in the Mekong Delta, finds that in a typical district, that of Thanh Phu, nearly 70% of residents could read by the end of the program.[126]

In tandem with building embeddedness, the Viet Minh instituted resource control. While southern fighters had some limited resources, "such sources of supply were not adequate to make the south self-sufficient, and [the Viet Minh] moved in many directions to help make up the short-fall."[127] They attained resource control through two institutions. First, French intelligence found that the Viet Minh leadership "made a great effort to organize the supply of weapons and equipment to the south" through an extended supply network running from the north.[128]

Second, the central component of resource control in both the north and the south was the redistribution of rural land. By recognizing the centrality of land to many rural citizens, the Viet Minh,

---

123. Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 179.
124. John T. McAlister, *Vietnam: The Origins of Revolution (1885-1946)* (Washington D.C.: American University, Center for Research in Social Systems, 1968), 125.
125. Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*, 221.
126. David Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta*, vol. 1 (Armonk, N.Y.: East Gate Book, 2001), 88.
127. Greg Lockhart, *Nation in Arms: The Origins of the People's Army of Vietnam* (Sydney; Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1990), 160.
128. Quoted in, ibid.

unlike its competitors, was able to provide direct and exclusive access to this resource. Land redistribution took on a role of placating lower and middle class peasants, as well as tying those individuals to the Viet Minh by providing access to food, land, and revenue. Communal lands that had been in use by notables were distributed in small chunks via an auction system and additional land was distributed to equalize holdings. Moreover, rent payments were reduced for all peasants renting private or public land. The Viet Minh also put in place systems to give land to wives whose husbands were in combat units deployed outside the village.[129]

As Elliott finds in the Mekong Delta, the land redistribution policies increased production, tied peasants to the revolution, and provided incentives for these individuals to pay taxes and "send their children off to fight."[130] Thus, it also helped to build embeddedness by encouraging villagers to attend meetings and participate in Viet Minh propaganda programs. One peasant told Elliott in the village of Hai De, "[B]y 1947 or 1948, the people who had received land zealously supported the [Viet Minh] Front and the Revolution because they had an interest in doing so. Before, [the poor peasants] didn't go to meetings very much and they didn't want to stand guard, but after they had received some land they would zealously attend meetings, stand guard, and participate in guerrilla warfare."[131] There were two direct reasons this was the case: (1) if they defied Viet Minh orders, their land could be taken away or worse and, (2) if the revolution was lost and the landlords returned to power, they would similarly lose their land and perhaps worse.

Viet Minh Conduct.   Given that the Viet Minh had created embeddedness and instituted resource control, the theory predicts that it would be able to maintain ceasefires and prevent large-scale defections despite its fledgling existence in southern Vietnam. Nonetheless, since it had not further embed-

---

129. Samuel L. Popkin, *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 225-27.
130. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War*, 122.
131. Ibid., 126.

ded itself amongst the southern footsoldiers, the theory predicts that the Viet Minh leadership would be unable to control who was targeted by violence as they would be unable to verify such violence and units would hide it from the central leadership.

With the return of the French in 1946, Viet Minh fighters unleashed a spate of uncontrolled violence contrary to the leadership's orders. In the urban areas, including Saigon, this included widespread terrorism and political assassinations—often a political assassination simply meant killing a French civilian.[132] There are countless reports of "grenade" attacks during the late 1940s in Saigon in which grenades were simply thrown into groups of people or restaurants. These attacks occurred despite urgent orders sent by the Viet Minh leadership to the southern cadre emphasizing that political repercussions would always outweigh the military benefits of widespread violence and calling for "extreme caution and prudence" in using any "terrorist tactics."[133]

Outside of Saigon, the situation was even worse as fighters massacred civilians despite orders from the central leadership to refrain from such violence. This violence was not reported by local forces, meaning the leadership would often find out long after such events.[134] After-action reports were highly critical of this behavior, emphasizing that it had damaged alliances in the south, particularly with elements of the Cao Dai religious sect. One such report observed that attacks had been carried out "indiscriminately on Cao Dai loyalists and reactionaries of the religion resulting in damage within the community...this error had serious consequences...It took a long time to recover from the negative impact of these errors."[135]

---

132. Christopher E. Goscha, "La Guerre par d'autres Moyens: Réflexions Sur la Guerre du Viêt Minh dans le Sud-Vietnam de 1945 À 1951," *Guerres Mondiales et Conflits Contemporains*, no. 206 (2002): 46.

133. Quoted in, François Guillemot, *Dai Viêt, Indépendance et Révolution au Viêt-Nam: L'échec de la Troisième Voie* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2012), 372-73.

134. François Guillemot, "Autopsy of a Massacre: On a Political Purge in the Early Days of the Indochina War (Nam Bo 1947)," *European Journal of East Asian Studies* 9, no. 2 (2010): 257-59.

135. Ibid., 260.

To limit the damage from this violence, the Viet Minh leadership rushed to establish a ceasefire. While the leadership could not control the targets or day-to-day use of force, they were able to get units to put down their arms. So, when the leadership in the north decided that violence must be "turned off" to avoid a full-on conflict with the French, the southern soldiers stood down despite the costliness of such a ceasefire. As Goscha observes, "turning on and off this southern type of war, however, would not be easy. That said, while Nguyen Binh [the leader of the southern forces] was most definitely independent-minded, he remained loyal to Ho during the tense months when the DRV asked him to agree to a cease-fire…Binh agreed to a cease-fire in the south, even though he had been against such an accord and knew full well that it could undermine his military strength in the south."[136] With this ceasefire, the Viet Minh were able to re-group and gain far greater capacity in the south over the subsequent years.

4.2.2   Comparing the Viet Minh With Other Conflict Actors

The Viet Minh's ability to turn violence on and off is impressive when compared with other organizations that faced more favorable structural conditions but were unable to gain control of their forces. For example, the main Viet Minh nationalist competitor, the QDD Front disintegrated under fire despite significant material support from Chinese nationalists. In fact, the French thought these nationalist forces were their strongest challenger. French intelligence noted in 1946 that the QDD Front "has expanded extensively, placing it far ahead of other parties...It is led by educated and young people, many with education in France. They have recruited many such good people."[137]

While this group held significant territory and installed resource control by centralizing the pro-

---

136. Christopher E. Goscha, "A "Popular" Side of the Vietnamese Army: General Nguyen Binh and War in the South," in *Naissance d'un Etat-Parti: Le Viêt Nam Depuis 1945 (The Birth of a Party-State: Vietnam Since 1945)*, ed. Christopher E. Goscha and Benoît de Tréglodé (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2004), 340.

137. Quoted in, Guillemot, *Dai Viêt, Indépendance Et Révolution Au Viêt-Nam*, 191; See also, Lockhart, *Nation in Arms*, 165.

vision of goods from China,[138] it failed to generate embeddedness. Rather than using tools such as village councils to unite disparate social groups, the QDD relied on nationalist propaganda to attract followers. Further, they tended to recruit from urban networks, significantly limiting their reach.[139] As a result, in clashes with the Viet Minh "a large number [of QDD Forces] either defected or were executed upon capture" and the QDD Front was handily defeated by the end of 1946.[140]

On the other hand, the Hoa Hao, an embedded Buddhist revival community, failed to leverage their embedded units with resource control. This was despite the explicit material support of the French, who used the Hoa Hao as an ally against the Viet Minh. As Woodside finds, though the Hoa Hao wanted to politically empower their followers, "Unlike their communist rivals, however, they shunned questions of economics, and of the distribution of economic resources."[141] As a result, Tai observes that, while Hoa Hao communities were internally cohesive, their leader, Huynh Phu So, was not able to control when or how their soldiers used violence:

> When they went on the rampage in non-Hoa Hao areas, they showed scant respect for the property of others and looted or burned everything that came across their paths. Huynh Phu So did not openly condone these acts and was often impelled to remind his followers of the Buddhist ideal of universal love. But without a clear sense of purpose and a program of action, he could only curb their wilder excesses; he was powerless to channel their energies into more constructive endeavors.[142]

5 Discussion

By focusing on the interaction of resource control and embeddedness, the theory explains how, facing very different environments, both JAM and the Viet Minh were able to control when their fighters used violence. While JAM had significant social endowments, it was only able to control when violence was used when explicitly developing resource control. After developing both resource control and

138. Guillemot, *Dai Viêt, Indépendance Et Révolution Au Viêt-Nam*, 218.
139. Popkin, *The Rational Peasant*, 222-224.
140. Guillemot, *Dai Viêt, Indépendance Et Révolution Au Viêt-Nam*, 353.
141. Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*, 197.
142. Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Millenarianism and Peasant Politics in Vietnam* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1983), 154.

embeddedness, the Viet Minh was able to control when its fighters turned violence on and off while many better-positioned organizations were unable to do so.

As the tests in Vietnam and Iraq demonstrate, the theory produces comparative statics: at a given time, the existence of resource control and embeddedness generate predictions about insurgent behavior. But, why do some organizations develop resource control or embeddedness? The most obvious potential concern with the theory is that some factor explains both why organizations establish resource control and how they are able to ensure compliance with orders to turn violence on and off. Existing research points to some potential pathways. For example, do the types of resources an organization starts with, whether particular material endowments or access to external support, determine how it will develop?[143] Or, do relatively stronger organizations, for example, those that hold a lot of territory, find it easier to attract and control their followers?[144] Or, finally, do state tactics influence how organizations develop?[145] While these factors no doubt shape the conflict environment, this sort of endogenous process is not empirically supported.

To begin with, as highlighted in Section 2, and cemented by the cases, the types and extent of resources—whether lootable or from an external patron—an organization can draw upon does not explain its internal control. As both JAM and the Viet Minh demonstrate, to generate resource control and embeddedness, often organizations must deliberately expand on initial endowments. While JAM was embedded, it only could turn violence on and off once it had put in place resource control. And because of the range and depth of resources it provided, JAM maintained this control even when Iran

143. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*; Idean Salehyan, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and David E. Cunningham, "Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups," *International Organization* 65, no. 04 (2011): 709–744.

144. Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars*; Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour, "A Plague of Initials"; Sinno, *Organizations at War in Afghanistan and Beyond*.

145. Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson, "Rage Against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars," *International Organization* 63, no. 1 (2009): 67–106; Jeff Goodwin, *No Other Way Out: States and Revolutionary Movements, 1945-1991* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

explicitly withdrew its support and attempted to destabilize JAM in 2007. On the other hand, while the Viet Minh did not receive external support, its main competitor, the QDD front did receive significant support. Yet, only the Viet Minh developed the ability to turn violence on and off. Similarly, while the Viet Minh started without social endowments, it still gained greater control of its fighters than the Hoa Hao forces, which were unable to turn violence on and off.

What about the relative power of organizations? Do groups with access to territory develop these features? Though JAM was stronger in 2006 than in 2004, Sadr was still unable to control *how* his soldiers used violence. On the other hand, when JAM's power was on the decline in 2007—it was being targeted by the Badr Organization as well as tribal groups empowered by the Sons of Iraq program—it was still able to maintain the ceasefire. Similarly, even though the Viet Minh was relatively weak in the south, they still were able to develop the ability to turn violence on and off without the territorial sanctuary that the Hoa Hao and QDD Front had.

In fact, it seems that resource control and embeddedness contribute to explaining how changes in relative power influence organizations, rather than the other way around. For some organizations, capturing territory or gaining new influence can undo resource control by empowering local leaders or reducing the importance of central leaders to deployed units. This observation explains why some researchers have found that geographic expansion can cause organizations to lose control of their soldiers.[146] On the other hand, organizations that have resource control will be able to expand without losing the ability to manage their footsoldiers, as JAM did throughout 2006.

Finally, what about state policies? The Viet Minh developed resource control and embeddedness despite being aggressively targeted by the French regime, which supported the Hoa Hao and other groups to target the Viet Minh. Despite being supported by the French, the Hoa Hao were unable

---

146. Gates, "Recruitment and Allegiance: The Microfoundations of Civil War"; Johnston, "The Geography of Insurgent Organization and its Consequences for Civil Wars."

to control whether fighters turned violence on and off. In Iraq, the US opposed JAM throughout its existence—while it grudgingly allowed JAM to join the political process, JAM was under significant pressure by late 2006. Even during the ceasefire, Sadr openly worried that the US would assassinate him.[147] Further, during 2007, the US empowered other actors against JAM, including tribal militias, as well as civil society actors that tried to wrestle support from JAM.[148]

If existing explanations cannot account for when and why organizations develop resource control or embeddedness, what can? The theory provides some guidance by isolating the role of leaders. Leaders must recognize that they must either seek out or expand upon the material and social endowments they begin with. In doing so, leaders must respond to external actors, competition within the conflict zone, as well as the struggles of winning and losing. While changes in these structural factors do not determine an organization's trajectory and development, they do provide leaders with opportunities or challenges for creating and maintaining resource control and embeddedness.[149]

Thus, it is not surprising that in his analysis of insurgent groups across Africa, Young finds that the key variables missing from existing studies are the role of the leadership and command structure of the organization. He finds that these factors, "although often neglected by academics," are "better suited for determining the ultimate outcome of insurgency conflicts in Africa."[150] Similarly, an increasing number of International Relations scholars have pointed to the importance of leader's choices and experiences in shaping their behavior and approach toward institution-building, particularly with respect to military organizations.[151]

---

147. Cockburn, *Muqtada Al-Sadr and the Battle for the Future of Iraq*, Chapter 16.

148. Krohley, *The Death of the Mehdi Army*, Chapters 5, 7-8.

149. In this vein, McLauchlin finds that, to limit desertions, organizations' must respond to the conflict environment by taking into account whether soldiers come from locations where they can easily hide after deserting (such as mountains). McLauchlin, "Desertion, Terrain, and Control of the Home Front in Civil Wars."

150. Young, "The Victors and the Vanquished," 179.

151. Todd S. Sechser, "Are Soldiers Less War-Prone than Statesmen?," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48, no. 5 (2004): 746–774; Michael C. Horowitz and Allan C. Stam, "How Prior Military Experience Influences the Future Militarized Behavior of Leaders," *International Organization* 68, no. 03 (2014): 527–559; Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness*

Nonetheless, there are complex pathways that lead some "good" leaders to be successful while others fail. While it is often possible to trace the rise of a particular leader, there appear to be few generalizable processes that predict success. Studying why military leaders make decisions about whether or not to invest the resources needed to develop strong military institutions, Talmadge finds that "leaders' choice of intervention practices is highly contingent and not easily predicted *ex ante* by examining other large structural variables in a given case."[152] It is likely that these decisions are even less systematic for insurgent leaders who operate in less structured institutions and environments. For example, though Mao's rise to power—and his central role in the Chinese Revolution—is taken for granted, the circumstances that put him at the head of the Communist Party were by no means predetermined or entirely in his control. Historians point out that Mao was often in the right place at the right time and owed some of this to "plain old luck."[153]

6 Conclusion

This paper argues that neither social nor material endowments alone can explain whether insurgents can turn violence on and off. Instead, organizations must explicitly seek out and put in place resource control to leverage embedded social groups. The theory explains how, facing very different conflict environments, both JAM and the Viet Minh achieved this level of control by generating resource control and embeddedness. However, neither of these organizations could exercise more fine-grained control over their soldiers. Thus, the approach in this article emphasizes that insurgent behavior should be evaluated in terms of meaningful categories, such as the ability to turn violence on and off, to control

in Authoritarian Regimes, Cornell Studies in Security Affairs (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

152. Caitlin Talmadge, "Explaining Military Effectiveness: Political Intervention and Battlefield Performance" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2011), 40.

153. Joseph W. Esherick, "Ten Theses on the Chinese Revolution," *Modern China* 21, no. 1 (1995): 53; See also, Ross Terrill, *Mao: A Biography* (Stanford University Press, 1999).

who is targeted by violence, or to carry out complex guerrilla tactics, rather than in terms of broad distinctions such as fragmented and cohesive.

These findings have implications for both researchers and policymakers. To begin with, while "weak" organizations are often discounted, the article demonstrates that insurgents with lower levels of military effectiveness are not unimportant in determining conflict outcomes. Organizations that are not militarily strong but have resource control and embeddedness are able to carry out collective activities such as keeping ceasefires. In this context, attempting to remove the social support or resource control of insurgent leaders may drastically reduce their ability to make deals that limit violence. Though it might appeal to policymakers to use overwhelming force against weaker actors, this approach can actually precipitate far more—and less controllable—violence.

That said, there is further work to be done to understand how insurgent leaders gain greater control of how their fighters employ violence by, among other things, regulating the types of targets selected and developing even greater military capabilities.[154] The theory demonstrates that researchers should focus on precise organizational processes to understand how leaders respond to the conflict environment and develop increasing levels of military effectiveness. For example, while some have found that greater "centralization of power" or access to particular resources reduces civilian casualties,[155] it is necessary to further disaggregate these factors.[156] As the theory highlights, control over more complex behaviors requires leaders to even further leverage the social ties of their soldiers through training and indoctrination to regulate behaviors even when the leadership cannot directly observe fighters.

This approach also provides guidance about when good governance and rule of law reforms may

---

154. For work along these lines, see Alec Worsnop, "Organization and Community: The Determinants of Insurgent Military Effectiveness" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2016).

155. Reed M. Wood, "Rebel Capability and Strategic Violence Against Civilians," *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 5 (2010): 601–614.

156. For a similar argument, see Wood, "Opportunities to Kill or Incentives for Restraint?"

help to win "hearts and minds." While it is hard to wrestle resource control away from embedded organizations that have put in place robust distribution systems—indeed, Krohley finds that attempts to do this with JAM in 2007 were unsuccessful[157]—attempts to address problems earlier in the process are likely to be more successful. The theory highlights that organizations will not be able to take control of fighting forces without creating resource control. As JAM illustrates, one pathway for insurgent groups to create resource control is by taking advantage of deficiencies in government provision of services or security. Similarly, in Vietnam, the Viet Minh was able to take advantage of poor land management policies and gain support by distributing land to peasants. Moreover, when institutions are weak and corruption is possible, insurgents that join the government can use existing infrastructures to bolster their cause at the expense of the state. As a result, this theory emphasizes that reforms that improve the transparency, accountability, and reach of government services should be implemented in tandem with efforts to counter nascent insurgencies to prevent such groups from developing resource control in the first place.

---

157. Krohley, *The Death of the Mehdi Army*, 98-99.